



SIGNING OF THE TIMES: 94 years ago today, Eamon de Valera signed the roll-book containing the oath at Leinster House - five years later, his party came to power, the oath was subsequently ditched and Fianna Fáil has been in government for a total of 63 years since 1932

Sinn Féin in power north and south would increase pressure for border poll

EVERY capital city has buildings and locations where events took place that changed the course of history. One of them which I pass frequently is Rathmines Town Hall (now part of Rathmines College of Further Education) in Dublin. In my teenage years I attended a Saturday night disco in the place, little realising as I bopped away to the music that this was the site of a fundamental re-arrangement in Irish politics. Ah, the carefree days of youth...

The event in question was the Sinn Féin and the of March 9-11, 1926. Party president at the time, Eamon de Valera, had a motion on the agenda that, if the oath of fidelity to the British crown in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty were removed, then participation in the parliamentary assemblies north and south would become "a question not of principle but of policy".

However, a counter-motion that Sinn Féin could not send representatives to any "usurping legislature set up by English law in Ireland" was passed by 223 votes to 218 and de Valera resigned as Sinn Féin president. In my mind's eye as I pass along, I can see himself and his close ally Seán Lemass walking down the front steps of the tall, claret-coloured building with its charming town hall clock.

Just over two months later, Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Destiny) was founded and, 94 years ago today on August 11 1927, Dev signed the roll-book containing the oath at Leinster House. Five years later, his party came to power, the oath was subsequently ditched and FF has been in government for a total of 63 years since 1932.

But as the song says, "Things Ain't What They Used to Be". In the current coalition, the office of taoiseach has been divided into two periods of time between FF leader Micheál Martin and

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his Fine Gael counterpart, Leo Varadkar. If you had predicted such a situation even five years ago, you could have been sent for a political version of counselling.

I wasn't present at Rathmines Town Hall in 1926 but did get to witness as a journalist another Sinn Féin ard fheis, 60 years later at the Mansion House in Dublin, where it was decided by 429 votes to 161 to end the policy of abstention from Leinster House. The party's initial electoral progress made a snail look like an Olympic athlete, but now the "Shinners" are riding high and could be serious contenders for office after the next general election, sometime between now and February 20, 2025.

That scenario might tempt some upper middle-class types to head for Dublin Airport, clutching their life-savings in a carrier bag.

Don't go betting the house on Mary Lou McDonald as taoiseach after the next general election, but don't rule it out either

Don't panic folks: as things stand at present, SF probably won't get an overall majority and, in that situation, will need to talk turkey with another party or parties and maybe even a number of Independents, with a view to achieving an overall Dáil majority.

Sinn Féin's social and economic policies are reminiscent of the centre-left Scandinavian model. But even if they get into government, SF ministers are unlikely to be holding the justice or defence portfolios in the short-to-medium term.

Parts of the electorate retain serious doubts about the party and are influenced by claims such as were made by MI5 and PSNI in 2015 that IRA members believed the army council still had a role regarding Sinn Féin in terms of overarching but entirely political and peaceful strategy.

So don't go betting the house on Mary Lou McDonald as taoiseach after the next general election, but don't rule it out either. Meanwhile in the north, SF seem to have a strong prospect of becoming the largest party after the next Stormont election which must take place by May of next year at the latest.

The recent announcement by Sir Jeffrey Donaldson that one of his predecessors as DUP leader, ex-first minister Peter Robinson, has been put in charge of an in-depth review of the party's structures, will be welcomed by proponents of the peace process.

Sinn Féin in government north and south would certainly mean increased pressure for a border poll. The Good Friday Agreement gives the British Secretary of State the power to decide if this should take place at a particular time.

That could lead to some very interesting exchanges between London, Belfast and Dublin.

ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 11 1921

Relief as TD released

ANXIETY and fear for the interruption of the peace negotiations created by the exclusion of Commandant Sean MacEoin, TD (Longford/Westmeath) from the list of Dáil Éireann members announced by Dublin Castle to be released to attend the Dáil meeting on the 16th has been happily allayed. This bad political blunder had promised to create a major crisis. The country rang with indignation at the 'exception' which was a distinct breach of the Truce and a repudiation of the Lloyd George letter inviting (Sinn Féin) a conference. Commandant MacEoin was released from Mountjoy Prison shortly after six o'clock last evening. The prompt expression of opinion on behalf of the nation by the National leader no doubt influenced this decision and the about turn of those who issued the original order. Mr de Valera and a large number of his colleagues were at the Mansion House early yesterday morning where the question of the detention of Commandant MacEoin and its effects on the peace negotiations was the chief topic of conversation. Some of the released members of Dáil Éireann referred to their prison treatment after their arrival in Dublin. There are 1200 men interned in the Curragh Camp (Co Kildare). Many of the internees who were there for a long period were in tatters and their boots worn to shreds.

TDs Released from Camp

THE following were released from Ballykinlar (Internment Camp, Co Down) yesterday: J O'Doherty, Seamus Doyle, Joseph McGuinness, Michael Hayes, Dr Richard Hayes, Patrick Hogan, Finian Lynch and Sean Milroy.

The Case Against MacEoin

COMMANDANT MacEoin was charged with the murder of District Inspector McGrath at Ballinalee, County Longford on 7th January. He pleaded not guilty. He declared himself to be 'a soldier of the Irish Republic' and contended that he had committed no offence against national law. After his conviction the parents of the dead inspector made an appeal to the government that Mr MacEoin should not be executed.

(Following strong representations from De Valera, the British authorities reversed their decision and released MacEoin despite his conviction for murder. Had he been court-martialled and found guilty even a few weeks earlier, his execution would have been guaranteed. Among the northern internees released was Louis J Walsh, a Ballycastle lawyer and popular playwright, who quickly published an account of his time in Ballykinlar, *On My Keeping, and In Theirs*. However, his former comrades were not impressed by Walsh's disclosures and showed their resentment by publicly burning their copy at a special ceremony in the camp. Walsh went on to become a district justice in Donegal after the establishment of the Free State.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com